THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

A sermon by Marshall Wingfield, pastor of First Congregational Church of Memphis, at the Installation of Rev. A. D. Pinckney as pastor of Second Congregational Church of Memphis, April 7, 1946.

For 79 years this congregation has had a vital part in the religious life of Memphis. Two factors have contributed to this happy history; 1st, an intelligent and consecrated membership; 2nd, a trained and devoted ministry. In this installation sermon I would suggest some requirements of this new day which, if met, will continue the fine history and traditions of Second Congregational Church.

Since this installation sermon is addressed primarily to the minister, it cannot begin in any better way than in the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy: "Stir up the gift of God which is in thee . . . be not thou ashamed of the testimony of our Lord . . hold fast the form of sound words . . . endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ . . . study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed . . . be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness, instructing those that oppose themselves . . . preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine . . . endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry."

There are many offices which the minister must discharge in the modern world, but all of them will be discounted if he merit not the name which was most frequently applied to the Founder of Christianity—teacher. Religion must be intellectually respectable as well as ethically sound. All truth is one. Science and religion are interrelated. Each is the other's ally. There is one ultimate irreducible from which both evolve. The whole truths of both are always harmonious. As a minister of an historic religion, you are to recognize that you are trustee of a body of knowledge which has been confirmed by the experience of centuries, and that you must transmit it, enriched by contemporary experience but unimpaired in substance, to generations as yet unborn.

The Bible is the chief source book of this knowledge and as such is the most sacred and important literature of the ages. But not all of the spiritual outlooks and moral attitudes of the Bible harmonize with the outlook and attitude of Jesus. Therefore, you are to recognize the Christian Gospel as the standard by which the whole Bible is to be interpreted and judged if the Bible is to have proper validity in a world that has grown and is growing in spiritual insight and sensitivity. If the Bible is to retain its ancient hold on the human heart, and if religion is to be intellectually emancipated, there must be a recognition of the universality and inexorability of laws which were unknown to our fathers.

It is unfortunate when men teach that which, because of its unscientific nature, must be unlearned. It is pathetic to teach as the essentials of Christianity any theory or theories of the virgin birth, blood atonement, physical resurrection and bodily return of Jesus, or to insist that one must believe in the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible in order to be a Christian. The redemptive power of Christ is not denied in the denial of the substitutionary theory of the atonement. Regardless of all disputes as to how the death of Christ saves, the cross still stands as the symbol of God's redemptive power.

It will be your purpose to portray Jesus in such a light as to make him loved and followed; to uphold the ordinances of the Church in such a fashion as to enable people to see behind the symbols that which is symbolized. You will be convinced that, despite all efforts of politicians and fanatics to nationalize, creedalize and neutralize Christianity, it is still a faithful saying that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. As of old, Jesus is still the supreme medium for knowing God.

In addition to "rightly dividing the word of truth," and applying the approved method of pedagogy, you are also to pay attention to the broadening perspectives of philosophy, and to give heed to the interpretative values of history, lest you present a religion with rational, emotional and volitional elements out of balance.

You are to be a priest as well as a teacher. Not in the meaning which Protestants have unfortunately attached to the name, but in the sense of being a builder of God-consciousness in contemporary religion. There is a mystical approach to spiritual reality as well as an intellectual approach. There are areas in life in which the operative laws are little understood. In these areas of faith, worship may help us to see in the darkness and to hear in the silences. Its values are introspective, therapeutic, intercessory and social. It must not be subordinated to a sermon. Worship is the heart's seedtime. It banishes the bleakness of the soul and dispels the darkness of the spirit.

In the public worship of God properly conducted, the soul may hear the rustle of wings, feel the pull of far horizons, and see the light that was never on land or sea. Therefore, repudiating all that savours of magic and sacerdotalism, and disclaiming any priestly function that is not available to all believers, you are, by leadership in public worship, to help bring about a deeper sense of God which, beginning with prayer and praise, shall issue in repentance and consecration.

You are to "do the work of an evangelist." Not by the methods which professional evangelists have used to the degradation of a noble name and a nobler work, but by trying to imitate Jesus who came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom with pity and understanding, and speaking boldly against all that marred the image of God in human souls. You are to proclaim that God is in His world and is therefore accessible; that he has revealed himself in Christ and is therefore recognizable; and that He invites us to share His life and is therefore imitable.

You will not fail to sound the prophetic note, but while sounding it, you are not to forget the great Christian convictions concerning God's presence in history. Shunning the emotional revivalism which has so discredited Protestantism, you are to proclaim that the love and forgiveness of God are ours because of what God is, and not because of our adherence to creeds and confessions, doctrines and dogmas.

The foes of religion are not those who dispute the historic creeds, but those whose spirits repudiate the spirit of Christ. In charging you to exercise a prophetic ministry, I would remind you that your function, like that of the ancient Hebrew prophets, is to interpret the time to your people and to put before them the great choices and alternatives of their day. The prophet has always been the great challenger and warner and conscience of his generation.

You are to help "dissolve the deadly dualism" which has crept into Christianity and caused many to suppose there is a personal gospel and a social gospel. While recognizing the importance of applying the gospel to society as a whole, you are also to understand that one must have before one can share, and that religion is as personal a matter as one's attitude toward life, as intimate as the deepest yearnings of the individual heart.

You must keep in mind that you are not preaching to the social order in general, nor to civilization as a whole, but to individual souls with hurts, perplexities and yearnings akin to your own. You are to see the individual members of this congregation as souls growing in Christian discipleship and destined for immortality. You are also to see the congregation as a cross section of humanity and as a part of the Body of Christ.

You are to recognize this congregation as your point of contact with the larger world. Any spiritual insights or religious knowledge which you may have to impart, must be imparted primarily to this congregation, and in such a manner as will guarantee its transmission to that larger world which you would reach and influence. To share such insights and inculcate such teachings as will make for better human relations, when enthusiasm for better relations is low, and when counteracting pressures are strong, will constitute the challenge and glory of your ministry.

The world today is bewildered by political strife, and economic maladjustment. All sorts of political economic doctrines are being advocated as remedies. Some of the proposed cures would have man trade his liberty for security. This denial constitutes a remedy as vicious as the disease. Nazism and Facism increased hatreds and maladjustments which was proof enough that they were not the right answers to the world's cry for better human relations.

There is another answer to the world's cry for better human relations which goes on the assumption that economic ills are caused by private ownership. Economic salvation is seen in consumers cooperatives and other forms of collective ownership. Another group, hating the capitalistic system, but without much faith in economic cooperation, advocates fanatical radicalism and violence. In this wilderness of confusion you are always to commend a spirit even when you are not wise enough to commend a way.

You are to be a Christian pastor, giving to all the interest and affection of a brotherly heart, and so counseling in the problems of applied Christianity as to make it a little easier for Christians to "resolve the deadly dualism" of idealism and realism. You may often be lacking in exact knowledge on controversial matters, but you will never fail to apply the spirit of Jesus, which matters most, and which must be applied if permanent solutions in human relations are to be found.

Only the spirit of Jesus can give endurance to our economic and cultural efforts. Without it the differences which exist among men will issue in deeper hatreds rather than in the understanding which comes from honest discussion. You are to believe in the applicability of the spirit of Jesus to every pain and problem of our common existence. So believing you will proclaim that this Spirit delivers from dogmatism, increases in us true humility and causes us to put the sacredness of human personality above all other considerations.

There is such a thing as "the larger Church." One phase of your ministry will be to cultivate the ability and disposition to participate in and contribute constructively to that Church. This larger Church does not yet embody the ideal of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. And it will not embody this ideal until there is long and patient cultivation of respect and understanding among peoples of differing racial back-grounds and religious viewpoints. To this end, your congregation must be inclusive and not exclusive. With economic and political groups denying responsibility in the common social obligations, and with religious groups refusing to include the whole human family in their concerns, theological hair-splitting and doctrinal shibboleths lose their importance.

Divided and competing Churches constitute the greatest scandal of Christianity. You are to promote interest in the larger aspects of the Church and interpret differing groups to one another in a manner which will lead to understanding and fellowship. You are to show how denominational differences may be transcended, and how the unity of spirit and purpose already existing, may be translated into a common program.

World peace and social justice wait upon a Church so united that it can speak for Christ. Such a Church will welcome varied cultures and give them liberty within the multi-culture of its fellowship. When we consider the exclusive claims of various religious denominations we are reminded of the lad, who, learning of an eclipse of the sun, sold tickets to his little neighbors so they could see the celestial wonder from his back yard. When it was all over, some heretical lad suggested that they might have seen the eclipse from any other back yard equally as well.

You are to so minister as to help the Church universal to a clearer vision of its responsibility for maintaining Christian standards in its own business transactions. The treatment accorded those who are employed by Churches is often unchristian. The fact that these workers lament their ineligibility to protection under the Social Security Act is a fearful indictment. Those who serve the Churches in every capacity from preacher to sexton should be able to feel that they have a social security as protective as anything the state can offer. As of old, the aspiration of man is for security. The quest for security is the urge for the substantial and is symbolic of the timeless, spaceless quest for reality.

You are to be aware of what the world has a right to expect of the minister and also of what the world has no right to expect. It has a right to expect the minister to be a molder of that public opinion which is the blood stream of the social body. So long as the stream is pure the body will be sound. Public opinion has four foundations: ill-will, prejudice, knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is knowl-

edge morally construed. The work of the minister is to remove ill-will and prejudice, to interpret knowledge in cosmic terms and equate its purpose with the will of the Eternal. Unless knowledge is made sufficiently moral to overcome ill-will and prejudice, there can be no hope for democracy.

The world has no right to expect the minister to offer technical advice in the field of science, nor detailed solutions for problems in politics and economics. It is his mission to build up a "divine discontent," to call man back to his highest dreams, and to communicate the spirit in and from which the best dreams may come true.

The wise minister will not say that it is possible for man to realize the ideal during his physical tenure of this planet. This earthly season is too short, the moral climate too hostile, and the environment too circumscribed for the terrestrial attainment of perfection. Even the Church which is to help man along in his struggle toward the ideal, may often have feet of clay. It may have smugness mixed up with inquiry, dogmatism mixed with spirituality, and prophetic courage mingled with apocalyptic despair. Yet man is destined to reach the heights for which he seeks and, in some other sphere, if not here, those who now hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be satisfied. Certain it is that no decent man has ever been spiritually satisfied during his earthly sojourn. But it is to the everlasting glory of man that "though chained to earth he looks across time and space toward an unknown perfection which he may never reach but will forever seek."

You are to be aware of the world in which, as a Christian minister, you will work. That is to say, you will be not only a man of God, but a man of the world, (in the best sense of that term) recognizing the new economic, political, religious, scientific and social procedures of our time and working to the end that good will may characterize all of them. We have had many revolutions, political, social, industrial and economic. All of them have failed of the goals to which they set out with high idealism and sanguine hopes. They failed because of the lack of good will. Over and over again, the ages have proved that Satan cannot cast out Satan.

We are now in the midst of a world revolution. When time lends proper perspective, it will be regarded as The Great Revolution. An old world is dying. The new is not yet born. We are shuddering at "the shape of things to come." In the passing away of old authorities and older landmarks, you will not fail to discern that certain qualities of mind and spirit have the sanctions of eternity. You will not fail to promote enthusiasm for those qualities of mind and spirit by which the prophets' dream of a fairer world may be made to come true.

You are ever to strive for what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he admonished Timothy to "make full proof of thy ministry." That is to say, you are to exercise a ministry which is rooted in awareness rather than in externals. The Founder of the Church from whom you have your commission "spoke as one having authority" from his experience of God. He was so intent on finding and doing the will of God that he was able to incarnate that will in his own personality and to express it in terms of validity and power.

In Jesus' day as now, men were identifying the Kingdom of God with all sorts of reform movements. They were content to keep God as a convenient symbol while interpreting His sanctions in terms of their own desires. When life failed to work out happily along the path their morally darkened minds had projected, there were some who said that God was no longer to be trusted. It were better to rely on a natural order and to trust the abstraction called destiny.

Then Jesus came preaching a God whose other name is Love. He said in many ways that man cannot be lost in the cosmic order, nor cease to be the supreme object of God's concern. To those afflicted with spiritual myopia, the cross seemed to contradict all that he had taught about God. But Jesus was willing to wait for the vindication of the years. The voice of the centuries now proclaims that he was right in declaring that God is love and triumphs in the end despite all Gethsemanes and all crosses. This truth will be the burden of your preaching and the inspiration of this congregation's activities during all the years of your relationship as pastor and people.